

# Philosophy prof. Agustín Rayo becomes new Dean of SHASS, begins role start of February

*Rayo was associate dean for four years and served as interim dean since the beginning of last summer*

**By Kristina Chen**  
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Effective Feb. 1, Agustín Rayo PhD '01, professor of philosophy, will be the next Kenan Sahin Dean of the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (SHASS) according to a Jan. 25 email from Provost Martin Schmidt PhD '88.

Rayo served as interim dean of SHASS beginning June 2021 after the previous dean, Melissa Nobles, became Chancellor of MIT. Nobles was dean from 2015 to 2021.

Prior to being interim dean, Rayo served as associate dean of SHASS from 2016 to 2019, during which he was chair of the Digital Humanities Steering Committee, the SHASS Faculty Diversity Committee, and the SHASS Educational Advisory Committee.

Rayo told MIT News that he hopes to “continue the work of past SHASS deans, to make sure that the fields we

study remain at the heart of the MIT experience.”

Rayo also serves on the Computing Council of the Stephen A. Schwarzman College of Computing and as co-chair of MIT's Committee on Departmental Life.

Additionally, Rayo was Senior House housemaster from 2010 to 2014 and in the 2013–14 academic year, Rayo was on the Task Force on the Future of MIT Education.

President L. Rafael Reif also told MIT News that Rayo “brings to the deanship a wonderful record of leadership to SHASS and of service to all of MIT, from faculty governance to student life.”

According to Schmidt's email, Rayo grew up in Mexico City and earned his undergraduate degree from the National Autonomous University of Mexico in 1996 and his doctorate in philosophy from MIT in 2001.

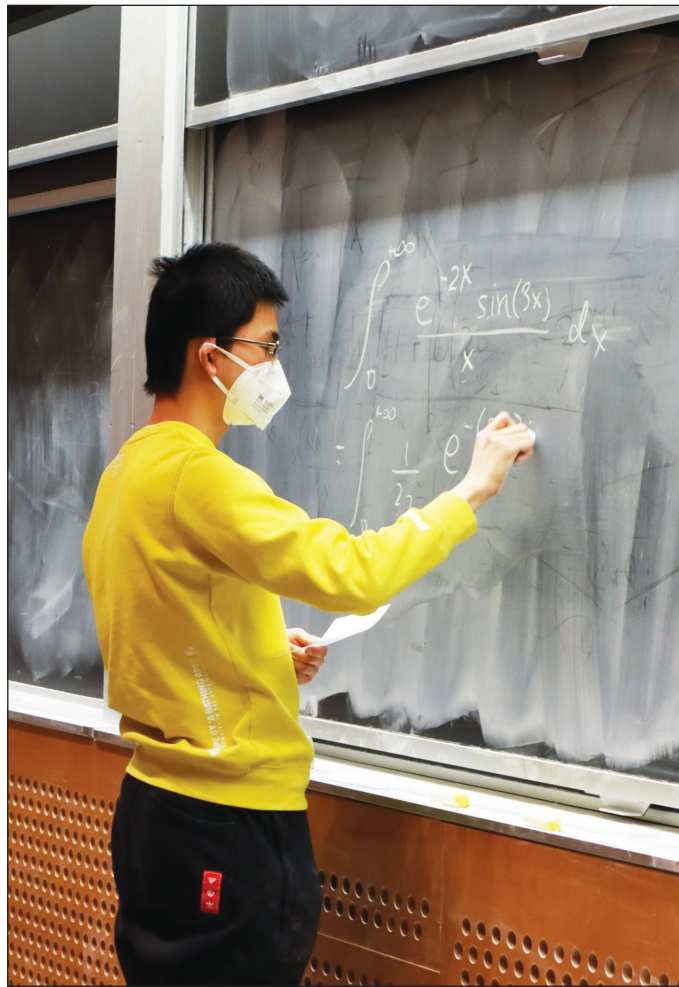
Rayo completed postdoctoral

research at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland and was assistant professor of philosophy at the University of California at San Diego before becoming a professor at MIT in 2005.

Rayo's research interests include metaphysics, philosophy of mathematics, language, and logic. Rayo has also taught 24.118 (Paradox and Infinity) almost every Spring term since 2012.

Rayo is a member of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, and his textbook *On the Brink of Paradox: Highlights from the Intersection of Philosophy and Mathematics* earned the 2020 Association of American Publishers Awards for Professional and Scholarly Excellence (PROSE) Award for the best textbook in humanities.

The Advisory Committee on the Selection of the Dean of SHASS, chaired by philosophy professor Caspar Hare, advised Schmidt on the selection of Rayo as dean.



KATE LU—THE TECH

**First place winner Shengtong Zhang '22 competes** in the final round of the 41st Annual MIT Integration Bee, Thursday.



FARIN TAVACOLI—THE TECH

**MIT students virtually coordinate** the 2022 Science Olympiad Invitational for high school students, Saturday.

# Cynthia Breazeal will become the next dean of digital learning at the beginning of February 2022

*Rajagopal steps down from dean position after five years to return to his full time faculty role in physics department*

**By Kristina Chen**  
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Effective Feb. 1, Cynthia Breazeal PhD '00, professor of media arts and sciences, will become dean for digital learning, according to a Jan. 26 email from Vice President for Open Learning Sanjay Sarma.

Breazeal is head of the Personal Robots group in the Media Lab and senior associate dean in MIT Open Learning.

Breazeal succeeds Professor Krishna Rajagopal who was dean for digital learning from 2017 to July 2021, when he began serving as acting vice president of open learning while Sarma was on sabbatical. Rajagopal will return to his role as physics department faculty full time.

While dean of digital learning, Rajagopal worked to expand MIT's MicroMasters Program, launch the next-generation platform for MIT OpenCourseWare (OCW), and led a consortium of 12 universities in “developing standards and tech-

nologies for verifiable digital credentials that allow learners to own their own credentials,” according to Sarma's email.

Rajagopal also aided MIT's Residential Education team during the beginnings of the pandemic by helping transition to remote learning and launch the campus-wide adoption of the Canvas learning management system.

Rajagopal will continue to serve Open Learning by chairing the OCW Faculty Advisory Committee and the leadership council of the Digital Credentials Consortium.

As the next dean for digital learning, Breazeal will oversee various business units and research groups working to develop and deploy digital technologies for learning, such as MIT xPRO, Bootcamps, the Center for Advanced Virtuality, and MIT Integrated Learning Initiative. Additionally, Breazeal will work on corporate education efforts through online professional courses and content as well as lead research efforts for enhancing learning and teaching through the

use of new technologies.

Breazeal told MIT News that she is excited “to grow and expand [the teams'] respective programs and to develop new, more integrated, potentially thematic solutions for corporations and professionals.”

Sarma wrote in his email that Breazeal “consistently displays an outstanding facility for leadership and collaboration” and that her work is “increasingly focused on inclusion and agency in the design, use, and education of digital technologies.”

Breazeal's own research interests include artificial intelligence, social robotics, and human-computer interaction, resulting in achievements such as the Hugable teddy bear used for pediatric care and the Jibo robot and research platform.

Breazeal is also director of MIT Responsible AI for Social Empowerment and Education (RAISE), a cross-MIT initiative on advancing AI education for K-12 and adult learners, which was launched last year.

## IN SHORT

**Registration week** for the spring term is Jan. 24–28.

Jan. 28 is the **last day of Independent Activities Period**.

**Undergraduate registration for third quarter PE classes** opens Jan. 28 at 8 a.m.

**Jan. 31 is the first day of classes** for the spring term.

Feb. 4 is the **registration deadline**, the deadline for second-term juniors to submit their HASS Concentration Proposal Form, and the deadline for final-term seniors to submit their HASS Concentration Completion Form.

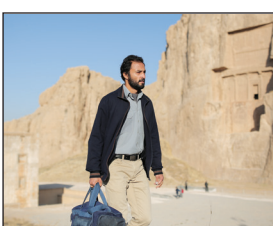
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## XKCD

Life Before the Pandemic.  
**FUN, p. 8**



## A HERO

What is a hero?  
**ARTS, p. 5**

## GSU FOR EDUCATION

Increased support for graduate student TAs can improve the quality of learning at MIT.  
**OPINION, p. 4**

## SECTIONS

Sports ..... 3  
Opinion ..... 4  
Arts ..... 5  
Fun Pages ..... 6



WEATHER

# Explosive Nor'easter to deliver foot of snow, gusty winds

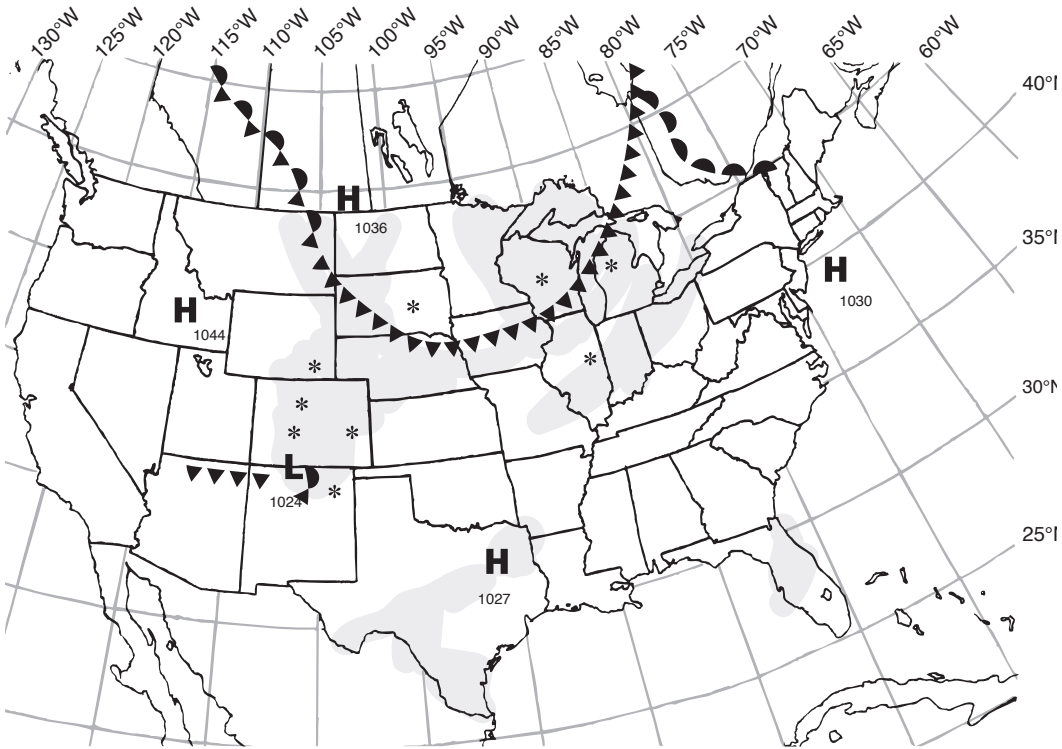
By Phoebe Lin  
STAFF METEOROLOGIST

Get ready for the storm everyone's been waiting for — an explosive snowstorm is preparing to dump around a foot of snow as it moves over Boston this Saturday! Gusts of up to 40 mph are expected throughout the day, and temperatures will remain chillingly low. Nor'easters, named for bringing northeast

winds over the East Coast, are common at this time of year, but don't let that fool you. These storms can cause widespread damage and power outages, so make sure to stay indoors when possible. Looking ahead, we can expect some temporary relief after Saturday with fairly sunny conditions. Boston is expected to warm up slightly as campus reopens to students!

Extended Forecast

**Today:** Sunny. High around 27°F (-3°C). Northwest winds around 5-8 mph.  
**Tonight:** Low around 25°F (-4°C), with southwest winds around 10 mph.  
**Tomorrow:** Mostly cloudy, then snow overnight. High around 34°F (1°C) and low around 13°F (-11°C). Winds 8-11 mph, turning north.  
**Saturday:** Heavy snow; winter storm watch in place! High around 25°F (-4°C) and low around 12°F (-11°C). Strong sustained winds, up to 23 mph, with gusts up to 40+ mph.  
**Sunday:** Mostly sunny. High around 24°F (-4°C) and low around 8°F (-13°C). West winds 11-14 mph.



Situation for Noon Eastern Time, Thursday, January 27, 2022

Weather Systems	Weather Fronts	Precipitation Symbols		Other Symbols
		Snow	Rain	
<b>H</b> High Pressure	--- Trough	*	•	☁ Fog
<b>L</b> Low Pressure	⌒ Warm Front	▽	▽	⚡ Thunderstorm
<b>§</b> Hurricane	▲▲▲ Cold Front	*	•	∞ Haze
	⌒ Stationary Front	**	••	
		Heavy	••	

Compiled by MIT Meteorology Staff and The Tech



Bad Ideas Weekend ends off the fun and chaos with a Glow Prop Spinning Performance, Sunday.

Capture the Moment

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- **Women's Basketball** clutched it out 76-72 against Springfield College.
- **Men's Volleyball** shut out Eastern Nazarene College 3-0.
- **Men's Basketball** beat Wheaton College 90-79.

**Women's Basketball**  
*vs. Connecticut College*  
7:00 p.m.

R	A	S	P	S	T	A	R	A	C	H	E
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## MOVIE REVIEW

# The Myth of Heroism: Asghar Farhadi questions the admirable In *A Hero*

Farhadi's latest drama examines society's fixation on simple stories of individual altruism

**By Mureji Fatunde**

Asghar Farhadi, widely billed as the pre-eminent modern Iranian filmmaker, has released his ninth feature film — a layered moral drama that explores questions of responsibility and atonement. Farhadi's stories are known for portraying tension due to class, gender, and religious differences, often in a family setting. In *A Hero*, the focus is on the former, with the film making a statement about the choices that poverty and powerlessness force on us. Deception is a common theme in Farhadi's films and appears frequently in his newest film as well. Prison and the role of restitution, which appear in Farhadi's second and fifth films (*A Beautiful City* and *A Separation*), are also central in *A Hero*. Despite this continuity in themes, Farhadi's narrative style has evolved since his earlier films: he is spare with explicit details about the histories and motivations of his characters, leaving the audience to untangle a web of complex relationships. *A Hero* also breaks free of previous films' dependence on a central mystery that is solved over the course of the film, with the narrative instead driven by the protagonist's internal development.

In a 2019 *New York Times* interview, Farhadi explained, “To get to know my characters, I need a crisis ... In crises, we show our true character.” The central crisis of *A Hero* is established early: the protagonist, Rahim Soltani (Amir Jadidi) defaulted on debt from a loan shark three years earlier, causing his guarantor, a man named Bahram (Mohsen Tanabandeh), to suffer significant losses. After several failed attempts

★★★★★

# A Hero

**Directed by Asghar Farhadi**

**Screenplay by Asghar Farhadi**

**Starring Amir Jadidi,  
Mohsen Tanabandeh,  
Sahar Goldust**

**Rated PG-13, Now Playing**

to collect payment, Bahram launched a legal claim against Rahim, leading to his imprisonment. With a dejected gait and a half-smile seemingly frozen on his face for most of the film, Jadidi effectively captures Rahim as both nervous and naïve as to the gravity of his actions.

Despite Rahim's bleak backstory, the film starts off on a hopeful note: in the opening scene, he is allowed to leave prison on temporary release. We learn that he has raised funds to pay half of his debt, which may free him permanently.

This seemingly straightforward solution soon fails in the face of the first of several twists: Rahim initially claimed that the money for his payment would come from a friend and that the money is "not a loan." After being pressed by his sister Malileh (Maryam Shahdaie), Rahim reveals that the money he "raised" was in fact inside a lost handbag found by his fiancée Farkhondeh (Sahar Goldust) and decides to search for the bag's owner. At this point, it feels as if a major moral obstacle has been overcome. In reality, Rahim's troubles are just beginning.

The prison officials learn of the bag incident, and they invite the media to cover Rahim's good deed in an apparent PR move. Rahim needs money to secure his freedom, not public accolades; however, he soon realizes that the public attention may yield a solution to his problems.

Thanks to an event organized by a local charity, Rahim is offered a government job, and community members contribute funds towards his debt. Though the event raises less than 25% of his total debt, it appears that Rahim has been saved, with one caveat: in order to fully secure the government job, he must produce the bag's owner and have her corroborate his story.

A key tension rests on questions of motivation: what motivated Rahim to return the bag? If it was anything other than self-driven altruism, is he really the “hero” that the title suggests? Class also subtly plays a role in this tension; Rahim’s choices were made in the broader context of desperation, likely creating a complex set of motives. Farhadi poses an uncomfortable question: in a world where not all have the luxury of pure motives, is it the act or the intention that counts?

Furthermore, buried within the publicity saga is a commentary about who society reveres. After being pressured to accept the donated funds as a deposit, a frustrated Bahram asks whether Rahim should be



AMIRHOSSEIN SHOIAEI (COURTESY OF AMAZON STUDIOS)

**Amir Jadidi as Rahim Soltani** in *A Hero's Death*

celebrated for doing what any decent person should do. When Rahim later confronts Bahram, he asks whether the man is “jealous” that Rahim is now respected by society. Bahram responds simply, “Poor people whose hero is you.”

Unable to locate the bag's owner, Rahim arranges for his fiancée to impersonate her. When his deception is revealed, all involved parties are forced to doubt Rahim's entire story, causing him to lose both the job and the donated funds.

By this point, we feel helpless regarding Rahim's debt. However, the central conflict has already been eclipsed by a deeper storyline: Rahim's role as an agent of his own fate. He repeatedly fails to own his decisions, blaming the prison officials and the TV channel for encouraging small lies and for the public attention that he did not seek. He also shirks responsibility for his circumstances, telling Bahram's daughter that he was "plagued by bad luck" and claiming that it's "not his fault" if the charity loses future support because of his actions. When pressed about impersonating the bag owner, Rahim responds: "I had no choice ... I couldn't find the owner." Of course, he did have a choice, and this scene simply highlights his lack of ownership.

Towards the end of the film, Rahim is faced with additional moral tests, and we see a new intentionality in him that was absent in the first part of the film. In a final meeting at the charity, Rahim finally asserts himself: "I don't care about this

money. I care about my honor." Despite wanting to save his reputation, he wisely declines opportunities to stretch the truth in order to do so. Even after being smeared publicly in a damning video by Bahram's daughter, he refuses to use his son's speech impediment to garner sympathy for himself. By resisting, Rahim regains some esteem in the eyes of viewers, if not the broader community.

While Farhadi is known for depicting dubious moral choices without seeming to cast judgment, it is hard to take a neutral view of Rahim's actions. Some of his decisions, far from being intentional, seem to result from his recklessness or thoughtlessness. Nevertheless, Farhadi succeeds in creating a complex, conflicted character whose development over time is evident. Other characters fail to develop to the same degree: Farkhondeh, who opposed returning the bag, remains willing to make moral compromises at the end of the film.

The film concludes with one of Farhadi's more resolved endings; although we don't know whether Rahim's debt will be resolved or when his sentence will end, we have some measure of confidence that he will make better choices in the future.

*A Hero* is a recognizable product of the well-oiled Farhadi machine; though the cast features none of the actors seen regularly in Farhadi's other films, he reunites with long-time editor Haydeh Safiari to deliver a rich and well-paced narrative.

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Solution, page 3

Instructions: Fill in the grid so that each column, row, and 3 by 3 grid contains exactly one of each of the digits 1 through 9.

**A WEBCOMIC OF ROMANCE,  
SARCASM. MATH. AND LANGUAGE**  
by Randall Munroe

